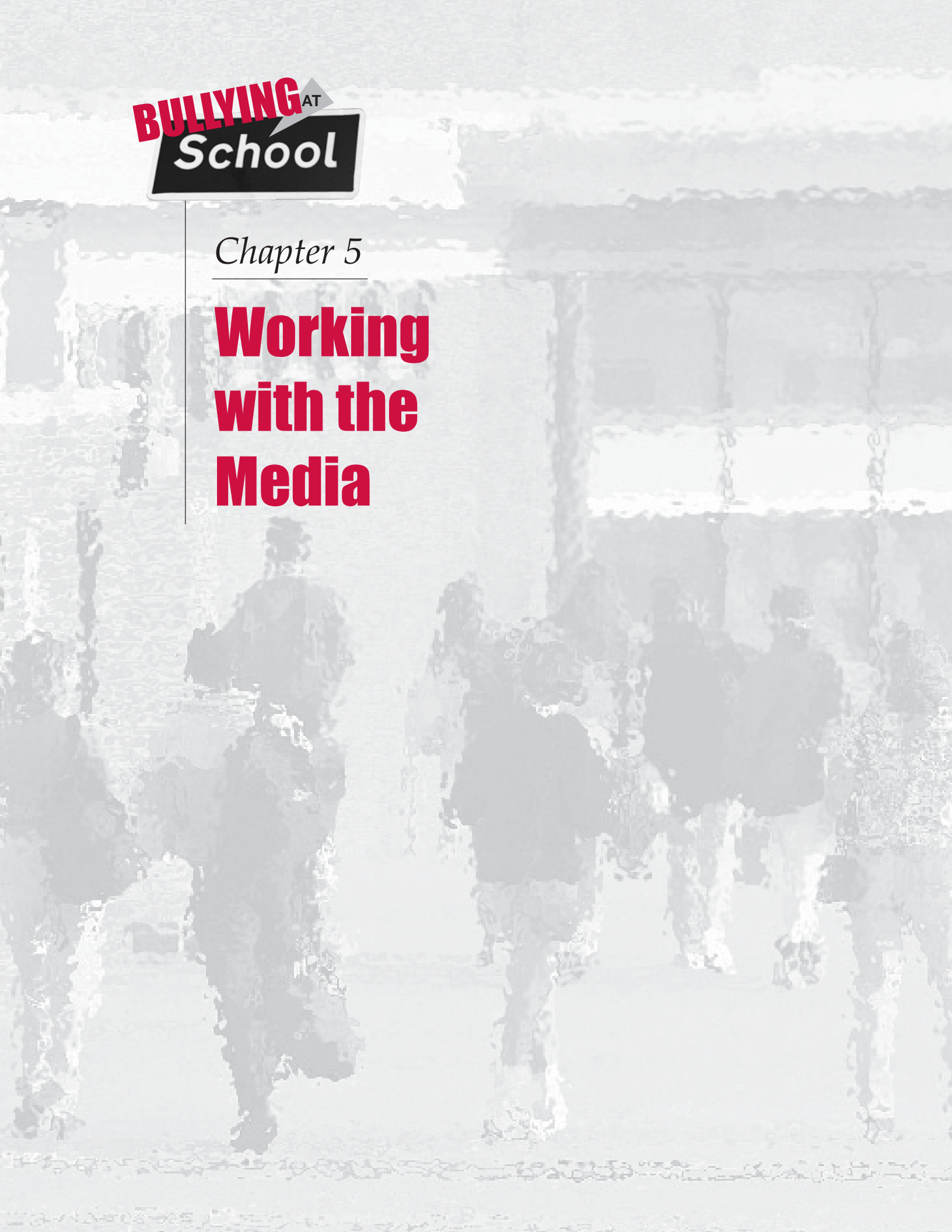


Chapter 5

**Working
with the
Media**



Working with the Media



SCHOOL administrators and staff shudder at the thought of having to deal with a public relations nightmare, but school incidents involving harassment, bullying, or crimes motivated by hate can haunt a school or district for years.

Newspapers and television and radio news play an important role in creating community perception about the quality of the schools. Planning prior to an incident for the day when media comes to a campus will preserve mutual respect and limit the harm caused by erroneous information and rumors.

School Profiles as a Public Relations Tool

In November 1988 California passed Proposition 98 to provide its schools a stable funding source. In return, all public schools must prepare and disseminate information through a School Accountability Report Card (SARC). It may be time to energize your school's profile. Along with your school's results of state test scores and other requirements, consider your school's profile to use as a communication tool for staff recruitment and orientation, for realtors and chambers of commerce, and as an outline for prospective parents and students entering your school.

Highlight key messages about what your school stands for (e.g., Reading Works at ABC Elementary!).

Include comments from parents, distinguished visitors, and community leaders. Use photographs of students and their work.

Highlight student results, including accomplishments and offerings in the art and music programs.

Highlight civic contributions made by students, staff, and parents throughout the year.

Typically, a reporter is assigned by the local editor to report on education and school issues. According to media consultant Thomas K. DeLapp, the average education reporter is young, has been on the job less than six months, and receives several assignments to carry out on any given day.²⁹ In a 1996 survey conducted by a New York public opinion research and citizen education organization, only 11 percent of educators believed that education reporters were experienced enough to understand the issues at hand, and 91 percent believed the media covered education news according to what “sells.”³⁰

A proactive media spokesperson can promote quality media coverage about the school’s strengths and accomplishments throughout the school year. A favorable report by media can increase community support if an unexpected, unfavorable incident occurs. A motivated spokesperson seeking opportunities for press coverage and wanting to improve the quality of the commentary will also respond to the public’s desire to know more about what is happening in the schools.

In the same 1996 survey, 86 percent of educators believed press coverage of education unfairly dwelt upon conflict and failure in the schools, and 52 percent of the public rated the quality of the local broadcast media’s coverage of public education as *fair* or *poor*. Sixty-six percent of educators and 42 percent of the public gave *fair* or *poor* ratings to local print media. However, when parents and the public were asked to choose one thing happening in their local community they were most interested in knowing about, 40 percent said public schools, 36 percent said crime, and 22 percent said the local economy.³¹

The study also surveyed members of the education media. Although they agreed that parents and taxpayers were their primary audience (not educators), the majority of those surveyed believed many education reporters were too dependent on school officials for their information and that news about public schools would be better if there were more in-depth reporting.³²

²⁹ Thomas K. DeLapp, Public Image Associates, Inc., Granite Bay, California.

³⁰ From a survey performed by Public Agenda on behalf of Education Writers Association. Copyright 1997, Public Agenda. For more information about the survey, contact the Education Writers Association, Washington, D.C. <<http://www.EWA.org/>>. A summary of the survey, titled *Good News, Bad News: What People Really Think About the Education Press*, may be ordered from Public Agenda, 6 E 39th Street, New York, NY 10016. Information on the findings reported by the Education Writers Association is available online <<http://www.nspira.org/>>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Inviting the media to sports events, school celebrations, and awards ceremonies provides opportunities for students and parents to contribute to what is written about the school. This invitation to the media represents a symbol of trust. By cultivating a positive relationship with the media, a school gains media respect and understanding when or if school officials deny reporters access to individual students during a crisis.

In a perfect world all media coverage would be complete and thoroughly examined for content and accuracy before being broadcast or printed. In the real world, however, especially if there is a crime, a disaster, or unexpected event that might negatively influence public perception about a school, a school can rely only on how recently and completely it has planned and prepared for the media. *Talking the Talk: A Practical Guide for Effective Media Relations* is a “how-to” manual with practical advice on working with the media.³³

When planning begins, schools should develop an accurate list of media spokespersons and their contact information. The list should include the local law enforcement contact and the *backup* person designated to provide media information for the school district. These persons, along with other appropriate school and community members, should be responsible for developing a well-thought-out plan of action that includes steps on notifying the media. The plan must be kept up-to-date and accessible. Schools must remember to include neighborhood and ethnic press, radio, and cable television stations in their contracts with the media. Planning and preparation prior to an incident goes a long way in de-escalating an incident, limiting erroneous information and rumors, and calming the community.



Preparation Before an Incident

MANY school districts will want responses to the media to come only from the *district spokesperson*; however, each school should designate a media representative and a backup contact whose responsibilities include calling the media, disseminating information, developing news releases, and following up with the community. Those staff members should be provided with media awareness training. The following guidelines may help staff entrusted with these responsibilities:

Be familiar with state and federal laws and regulations that affect the safety of students. Federal legislation (No Child Left Behind Act)

³³ *Talking the Talk: A Practical Guide for Effective Media Relations*. Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1998.

describes the schools' responsibility to help students overcome barriers that would leave them academically behind.³⁴ The California *Education Code* also reflects changes regarding school safety plans for schools according to new legislation enacted each year. (See *Education Code* Section 35294 et seq.)

Develop cooperative working relationships with the media during standard school operations. If an extreme or unpredictable event occurs that causes emotions to run high and attracts media attention, an established rapport will ensure an agreed-upon level of cooperation and accuracy in the reporting.

Prepare a statement to use in the event of a critical incident or emergency. Give some thought to possible questions and prepare appropriate and complete responses. Include highlights of specific safety programs and strategies at the school and share positive improvements in student behavior and school climate.



Reactions to an Incident

INCIDENTS that require an emergency response from law enforcement or the fire department are usually ones in which *first responders* are needed. There should also be a media spokesperson at the scene from the school or district. Whether an incident is major or minor in scope, if it involves a victim and perpetrator, schools must protect the privacy of the target and the right of the accused not to be tried in the media. It is important to know public records laws and what schools may divulge to the media.³⁵ (See *Education Code* Section 49060 et seq. for regulations about confidentiality.)

Television and radio broadcasts generally use portions of taped interviews of school administrators, witnesses to the incident, or law enforcement representatives at the scene. Although portions, or *sound bites*, from the responses are selected and interspersed throughout the story, seldom are the reporter's questions heard or seen in the broadcast. It is important for staff to remember that the story is tailored from the responses. The following tips are offered to help in structuring interviews with the media:

1. *Gather information and compose responses* before beginning an interview. A personal interview or telephone request for comments may occur without notice. For television interviews, select a

³⁴ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, PL 107-110 <<http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA027>>.

³⁵ Patrick Jackson, "Controversial Personnel Issues Require Aggressive PR." Click on "Network" <<http://www.nspira.org/entry.htm>>.

background that portrays a positive image of the school (e.g., the student garden or statuary project, a mural painted by students in a hallway, or an outside wall).

2. *First express compassion for the individual*, as well as the school, if an incident involves an individual victim.
3. *Ask the journalist for a business card*, contact information, or a form of identification to confirm his/her affiliation and to be able to call the journalist later if necessary.
4. *Avoid answering "global" questions* (e.g., "Why is there so much violence in schools?").
5. *Avoid being short or glib*, becoming defensive, or using sarcasm that can be taken out of context.
6. *Restrain the urge to "fill in" silences or pauses* between questions in an interview.
7. *Avoid acronyms or initialisms* that represent entities or associations that are unfamiliar to those outside the education community. Give the entire name of the program or entity (e.g., "Our School Attendance Review Board [SARB] will discuss the issue at its next meeting").
8. *Avoid comparing schools* in terms of their history or profile. Instead, provide information about the school in positive terms.



Follow-up After an Incident

A GAIN, preparation beforehand is critical. Questions must be anticipated and responses agreed on prior to the press conference. It is important not to entertain speculative questions or opinion. The victim and perpetrator must be protected from questioning and secluded from reporters. School staff should keep the following points in mind:

- If the incident has created anxiety and fear at school and in the community, an update or report on the findings of the investigation may be warranted. If the suspect is found guilty, prepare a brief statement that shows what the school district is planning to do to avoid a similar situation in the future.
- If the incident happened off school property and on the student's own time, be sure to emphasize that it is a criminal justice matter.



Media Access on Campus

CALIFORNIA schools have made progress in determining how to provide equitable access for *all* school visitors, including members of the media, as a part of planning for overall school safety. The procedures vary from district to district; however, consistencies in guarding against unwanted visitors include posting signs at all school entrances to direct *all* visitors to the school office, where they may obtain authorization to be on the grounds. In addition, the signs give directions to the office, post the school's hours of operation, and state the penalty for trespassing or entering the school grounds without making one's presence known to school officials.

Schools may deny visitors access to the school grounds or to students in accord with *Education Code* Section 32211. That section provides schools with the authority to ask a visitor to leave if his/her presence becomes disruptive.

Penal Code Section 627 (which also allows school administrators to ban outsiders from campus) specifically exempts reporters exercising the constitutionally protected right to freedom of speech.

In 1996 the California Attorney General issued an opinion that clarifies a gray area for school administrators and provides a caveat that school officials may exercise to limit access by the media to students on campus during unsettling or stressful times. Although opinions by the State Attorney General are not binding, they can heavily influence decisions of the court.

The opinion (79 Ops.Atty.Gen.58, 6/10/96) states that although members of the media may not be prosecuted for violating *Penal Code* sections 627–627.11, members of the press are not given an affirmative right to unlimited, unrestricted access to school premises. School officials may deny access to the media, as they may deny access to anyone, if their presence interferes with the peaceful conduct of the activities of the campus (*Penal Code* Section 626.6). School officials may direct a visitor to leave if his/her presence would be disruptive, regardless of the visitor's intent (*Penal Code* Section 627.2; *Education Code* Section 32211).

School districts must be sure that campus admittance procedures are the same for all visitors. For example, if members of the media are to be escorted by a staff member, then the standard should be an escort for *all* campus visitors.

Schools must also consider that although there are methods for limiting media access to the school and its students, administrators run the risk of future alienation if they are discourteous or violate the constitutional rights granted to members of the media.